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The Formation of a Research Collaboration: Same Time, Next Year? An Essay

Cheryl Keen

Abstract

This essay describes the evolution of two scholars' discussion of common interests in a major national study involving faculty, students, and a community partner. A service-learning project involving analysis of a large service-learning alumni database by a graduate research methods class was central to the project. Compelling findings about the formation of civically minded professionals emerged. This essay focuses on that process, while identifying the major outcomes.

How many times have you attended a conference, met an exciting colleague, felt exhilarated about your shared interests, declared intentions, and then made promises to collaborate on research or write "something" together? And then, how many times have well-intentioned pledges evaporated within a few months?

My experience with a successful research partnership defies this pattern. What made it work this time around? Was it the diversity, dedication, or personality of the partners? Was it the allure of a robust dataset that could shed light on civic patterns of college graduates? Or was it the enthusiasm of a graduate student class using real data and working with real community partners?

My research focused on understanding the inclinations of others to work toward the common good. For years, Julie Hatcher, of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), and I said how wonderful it would be to work together on a project. We attended the same conferences, shared a commitment to the public purposes of higher education, studied the same books on civic engagement, and found each other's work very compelling. And we were only separated by a two-hour drive! What promise!

Yet, years passed.

In 2009, both Julie and I participated in a Symposium on Civic Learning Outcomes, co-hosted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and IUPUI. A few months after the two-day summit, I was asked to survey the alumni of 25 campuses of the Bonner Foundation's Scholar Program and make a report at their 20th anniversary event. I was sure I could enhance this opportunity to learn about the civic development of 4,000 alumni of the four-year co-curricular service-learning programs if I included Julie's recently developed Civic-Minded Professional (CMP) scale.

Forgoing the two-hour drive, Julie, Bobby Hackett, president of the Bonner Foundation, and I met by phone several times and developed a survey to reach our shared goals. The Bonner Foundation was most interested in program dimensions and current levels of civic engagement of the scholars, while Julie and I were most interested in understanding how dialogue, reflection, and interaction with faculty contribute to civic growth. The Bonner Foundation staff found 3,000 alumni email addresses. We were fortunate to get almost 1,000 responses. We presented descriptive data and preliminary findings at the Bonner alumni event. I remember Doug Bennett, soon-to-retire president of Earlham College, saying that most colleges would drool over a 33% response rate and the high levels of civic engagement reported by the Bonner Scholar alumni.

We swallowed some scholarly pride and shared the preliminary analysis of the data at the International Association of Research on Service Learning and Civic Engagement (IARSLCE) conference in fall 2010. We had wished to be further along by the time of the conference, but as full-fledged members of the sandwich generation, we each had to face and assume new responsibilities to care for aging parents, and this, coupled with our daily work, limited our ability to dive into the rich dataset. Nevertheless, we found the IARSLCE audience enthusiastic about the research, the questions, and the methodology. More importantly, Professor Dan Richard of the University of North Florida (UNF) was so impressed by the dataset, and the important questions represented by the many variables, that he approached us at the end of the session to inquire about our working together. So, promises were made to meet "same time, same place, next year."

What happened in that year astounded all of us.

Dan was curious about service learning, but did not have experience in leading a service-learning class. The opportunity to engage his graduate statistics class in analysis of the alumni data was very enticing. Since I was traveling nearby, he arranged for me to meet his class. For the next 9 months, we communicated on the phone via Skype and through email. We had the Bonner Foundation president and Julie speak to the class via iPhone. At the end of the semester, the class presented their results to us via Skype. And when the semester was over, a core of students kept working with Dan to further analyze the data.

In November, we indeed met at the “same time, same place” and five partners—the evaluator, the researcher, the professor, the student, and the Foundation program officer, Ariane Hoy—presented a finely analyzed dataset with compelling results to attendees of the annual IARSLCE conference. The UNF team developed a great sense of ease with and ownership of the data. All five partners were deeply invested in the findings. We could ask questions of each other like family members concerned about the family farm.

When we presented, we must have modeled collaboration. The audience seemed torn between being impressed by the implications of the results for their own institution and by the partnership they witnessed. Most of all, the professional presentation of student Heather Pease was a manifestation of what we had to share.

So what had happened to make this partnership work? Why did our heartfelt promises at a conference not evaporate?

As a faculty member at an online institution, I lack access to a local research center where I can easily collaborate with colleagues. I trusted my intuition about a new partner willing to work virtually. I long ago shed my proprietary sense about data, having written a book with three co-authors and published most of my articles with others. Julie needed access to a larger dataset to conduct confirmatory factor analysis on her scale. As for Dan, he was first intrinsically interested in the possibilities in the data analysis and then realized that he and his students could be learning while also providing service to a community partner. Heather and her fellow students seemed to be drawn by the opportunity to find their own voice as researchers, to discern researchable questions in a large database to whet their curiosity and growing concern to understand the roots of civic engagement. The Bonner Foundation was patient with the year’s process, one of many collaborations

they were supporting.

And how do we know it worked? Every partner in the collaboration benefited. The faculty types in the group (Dan, Julie, and I) are all quite pleased that a class of graduate students discovered the potential power of quantitative analysis to answer important questions. Heather has found that she “loves data” and is busy applying to a doctoral program to grow her research skills. The Bonner Foundation has found confirmation of their assumption that they should focus on connecting people, and that sharing data, and allowing others to muck with it, benefits everyone. Julie gained access to a diverse group of professionals to help confirm the validity of her CMP scale. Dan gained confirmation that service-learning didn’t just sound like a good idea, but also seemed to propel the kind of learning he was hoping for in his master’s level stats class.

And I? I’m feeling quite generative and satisfied at this culmination of some life work. And now I’m looking for my next partner to meet “same place, same time” next year. Anyone want to help me analyze some new and interesting data? Meet you at a conference soon!

About the Author

Cheryl Keen is a specialization coordinator of Ph.D. in Education foundation and core courses at Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University.